
TRAC Theoretical Roman Archaeology Conference

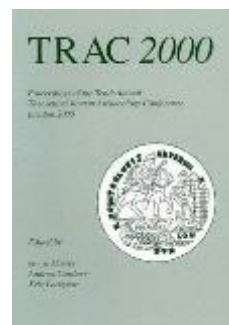
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TRAC 2000

Proceedings of the Tenth Annual

THEORETICAL ROMAN ARCHAEOLOGY CONFERENCE

held at the

Institute of Archaeology, University College London
6th–7th April 2000

edited by

Gwyn Davies, Andrew Gardner and Kris Lockyear

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TRAC 2000

Gwyn Davies, Andrew Gardner and Kris Lockyear

Institute of Archaeology, University College London

The tenth Theoretical Roman Archaeology Conference (TRAC 2000) was held on the 6th–7th April 2000, at the Institute of Archaeology, UCL, and attracted a diverse range of participants. A welcome addition to the conference was a sizeable contingent of students and colleagues from the Low Countries, who helped to dispel the pall of insularity that has often characterised TRAC. It is to be hoped that this broader European dimension may be sustained in coming years.

In a relatively slim volume of proceedings such as this it is impossible to reproduce a faithfully definitive digest of the arguments advanced in the course of the conference, but we trust that the reader will find the papers presented here to be an interesting and representative sample. It is our hope that this publication will convey some sense of how rewarding it can be to employ theoretically-informed approaches to investigate the rich database that is the Roman world and that by introducing some of this potential via the papers within, we can foster the enthusiasm that will be required to keep TRAC on course into its second decade and beyond.

As the conference was divided into five separate sessions with the addition of an informal evening debate (see below), the same basic structure has been followed for the presentation of the papers. Whereas each of the thematic sessions has been represented in the following pages, the vicissitudes of the ‘article formation process’ have precluded any idea of ascribing equal prominence to the separate component elements. However, this comparative imbalance between sessions should not be taken to imply any judgement as to the respective merits of the actual themes and their participants.

In the opening session, *Representing the Romans*, the speakers explored the methodology (and the resulting consequences) of portraying the Romans to the wider world. Hunter and Clarke’s paper outlines the challenge of designing appropriate gallery displays for the new National Museum of Scotland, where the limitations of strict chronology were abandoned in favour of a broader thematic treatment. Grew’s discussion of the various explanations advanced to account for the development of Roman London is similarly sensitive to a shift in perspective, and he argues that the interpretation (and presentation) of the available evidence will always be conditioned by the latent biases of the time.

The importance of recognising the impact of discrepant perspectives in shaping our reading of historical events was a theme that crossed session boundaries as Fincham’s paper for *The Roman Army in Context* demonstrates. To illustrate his discussion of the rôle of ‘suasion’ (the threat of overwhelming military intervention by the imperial power) in colonial negotiations, the author employs the analogy of 19th century European adventurism in Africa, suggesting that the parallelism in treatment can be traced to those universal fears of isolation and vulnerability endured by the agents of colonial power throughout history.

The identification of inherent bias in our literary source material is also relevant to Gardner’s contribution in which the problems of establishing identity (whether of

an ethnic, class, gender or occupational nature) within the later Roman army are addressed. In Baker's paper, the question of identity is again raised, this time in relation to the practice of medicine within different units of the Roman army.

An indication of the extent to which Roman army studies have been under-theorised in the past is provided by Davies, whose discussion of the connotative aspects of one particular class of field monument (the siege work) opens the possibility of pursuing explanations for other types of army-built structure that transcend the simply functional.

The general session, unsurprisingly, encompassed a wide range of subjects. Aldhouse Green's paper (which must win the award for the most intriguingly entitled contribution!) presents an important discussion of the nature of human/stag hybrids in Iron Age and Gallo-Roman iconography and posits the continuation of traditional concepts of liminality and states of transition between human and spirit worlds. Hawkes' presents an analysis of the differential foodways (the processes of preparing and serving meals) encountered in Roman Britain. This research also offers the possibility of obtaining an insight into continuity between Iron Age and Roman practices as well as allowing an assessment of the degree to which 'Roman' material culture may have penetrated (and have been assimilated by) the wider community on a very basic level.

A related question concerning the extent to which archaeology can explore the identity and status of the Romano-British population through artefact assemblages, formed the *leitmotif* for the fourth of our structured sessions, *The Identities of Romano-British Artefacts*. Of the two of the contributions reproduced here, Spradley's paper forms a *cri de coeur* on behalf of those beleaguered finds specialists who feel undervalued and marginalized in the new archaeological order. Carr considers the rôle of body decoration and grooming mediated via their manifestation in the artefactual record, to argue that individuals in different areas of south eastern Roman Britain 'made different cultural choices from the same repertoire of material culture to structure their ethnic identities, whether tribal, local or individual'.

The final set of papers focused on *Constructing Childhood in the Roman World* and reconsidered some long-standing truisms regarding the status and treatment of children in the Roman context. Pearce's paper re-examines the evidence for the contention that the increase in the incidence of infant burial in late Roman cemeteries compared to the numbers found in previous centuries represents a conceptual shift. His research would, however, seem to indicate that ascribing this to Christianity is far too simplistic a proposition. Scott examines the problem of the putative deliberate infanticide of unwanted female and disabled offspring, and shows that these ideas are too simplistic, with infanticide being a culturally specific phenomenon. Finally, Gowland's paper draws attention to how the general under-representation of children in Roman cemeteries has resulted in a failure to adopt any systematic investigation of the social identity of deceased infants in comparison to the commonplace examinations of other funerary contexts.

An important element in the programme for TRAC 2000 was an informal debate held at the end of the first day. This was partly intended as a follow-up to a much larger debate at the Roman Archaeology Conference, 1999, held in Durham, in the hope that a less intimidating environment would allow a broader spectrum of people to express their views. The tenth anniversary of TRAC seemed an appropriate point at which to reflect upon the past, present and future of the conference. The entire session, which was opened by Eleanor Scott and Ray Laurence, was recorded. Although it has not proved possible or appropriate to publish the recording, a summary of this

useful discussion is offered here. Several themes were flagged up by Eleanor and Ray. Both stressed the need for TRAC to retain — or perhaps develop — a more radical, cutting edge stance which would continue to challenge and confront the mainstream in Roman archaeology, in the spirit of the first conference which Eleanor organised. Both also drew attention to the dominance of postgraduate student speakers at recent TRACs, and while acknowledging the importance of this as part of the rôle of the conference, argued that it must always remain open to other voices within Roman archaeology. Critical importance was attached to TRAC reaching out, not only to ‘mainstream’ Romanists but also to other archaeologists of all persuasions.

Indeed, the theme of ghettoisation formed a key part of the subsequent debate, and it provides a useful way of structuring this summary. Ray in particular linked the inability of Roman archaeologists to develop — and communicate — innovative approaches to their material to the air of gloom hanging over the field in terms of academic jobs. While it can be argued that the fault in this lies on both sides — as one speaker pointed out, Romanists are often dismissed by those working in other areas — there is no doubt that the kinds of things talked about at TRAC need to be made relevant and available to the wider discipline of archaeology. A need for contributions to be made to conferences such as TAG was voiced, not simply in the form of ‘Roman’ sessions, but within cross-disciplinary themes. In a broader sense, given that one of the sessions at TRAC 2000 dealt with *Representing the Romans*, the issue of communicating whatever it is that makes TRAC exciting to us to a wider public was addressed. Various ways of ‘reaching out’ were raised, including adult education, schools talks and engagement with the media, although it was pointed out that these were things to be tackled by individuals rather than TRAC as a whole.

The focus on problems facing Romanists in the academic job-market prompted an important strand of the debate on the representation and participation of other professionals — field-workers, finds specialists, museums staff and others — at TRAC. Although a decline in the teaching of Roman archaeology in universities would, it was argued by one speaker, have serious consequences for all professional study of the subject, there was clearly agreement that TRAC should be a forum in which professional boundaries could and should be crossed. In spite of some practical obstacles to this — such as conflicts between the availability constraints of different groups and of facilities — it was agreed that future TRAC committees should make every effort to keep a mailing list going that included field units, museums and other professional bodies as well as universities.

The third ‘ghettoisation’ issue, which emerged from this discussion, was the somewhat parochial nature of most TRACs: they are dominated by British speakers, often discussing Romano-British archaeology, and are always held in British universities. The possibility of the conference moving elsewhere was raised, but again practical problems for British postgraduates and professionals in being able to reach such an event were pointed out. It was resolved to make sure that if money were needed to bring speakers to Britain, then appropriate applications would be made to the Roman Society.

The other major issue at the debate, on which a vote was held, was whether to continue the practice of twinning TRAC with the biennial *Roman Archaeology Conference*. There was some disagreement on whether this arrangement had been wholly successful, although as Eleanor pointed out at the start of the session, a convergence of interests could be detected in the agendas of the two conferences — indicating that TRAC had succeeded in influencing the more ‘mainstream’ partner. There was some concern, however, that this situation might leave TRAC with nowhere

to go, and might also be related to the increased postgraduate dominance of the latter, making it a kind of 'junior' RAC. Nonetheless, the positive benefits of twinning — promoting cross-fertilization and giving TRAC speakers a wider audience among them — were sufficient to carry the vote in favour of persisting with the current arrangement. In general, the tone of the debate was very positive about TRAC and its value as an open discussion forum. The first decade of the conference must therefore be seen as a success, but if this success is to continue, all of those involved with the conference must push harder on two fronts. First, TRAC should continually stretch the parameters of theoretical Roman archaeology, moving, as Ray discussed in his opening presentation, away from tired debates like 'Romanisation' and exploiting the extremely rich veins of data and of social theory which are available to us. Second, the conference must strive to avoid those ghettos into which it is vulnerable to being led, crossing boundaries of discipline or sub-discipline, profession, and nationality. If these goals are actively and enthusiastically pursued, TRAC can look forward to increasing success in its next ten years.

The conference would not have taken place without the help we received, both financial and practical. We would like to thank the Society for the Promotion of Roman Studies, and the Complex Societies, and Social and Cultural Dynamics Research Groups (both of the Institute of Archaeology, UCL) for their sponsorship. The organisation of the conference was made possible by the help and good will of the staff of the Institute, including Jo Dullaghan, Susan Brackstone, Barbara Brown, Judy Medrington and Steve Townend; Stuart Laidlaw kindly recorded the debate for us and put on a display of photographs; Ash Rennie helped with the web site and TRAC email; and the registration and coffee was manned by students of the Institute including Andrew Banyasz, Jonjo Corbett, Andrew Mayfield, Catherine Rayne and Helen Woodhouse. We would like to thank in particular Professor John Wilkes who helped with the conference organisation and gave the opening address. A number of people were press-ganged into organising, chairing, or being discussants at the sessions, and we would like to thank them, especially Ray Laurence and Eleanor Scott who agreed to speak at the debate. Lastly, we would like to thank those who agreed to referee the papers for this volume, and David Brown of Oxbow Books for continuing to publish the conference proceedings.